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ABSTRACT

In the early 1970s, the Speech Communication Association, with the support of a grant from the Axe-Houghton Foundation, sponsored the National Project on Speech Communication Competencies. The final report of that project was published in 1976 by the National Textbook Company under the title "Developing Communication Competence in Children." The functional approach advocated in the report was characterized by two themes: (1) instruction for competence in speech communication is organized around the communication acts of controlling, expressing feeling, informing, ritualizing, and imagining; and (2) instructional situations should be designed to help students develop a wide repertoire of communication strategies and skills, select skills that seem appropriate to the situations, implement the skills through practice, and evaluate the effectiveness and appropriateness of the skills used. In the years following the publication of the report, the functional approach advocated in the project has encouraged curriculum development, influenced the preparation of instructional materials, contributed to the dialogue about the nature of communication competence, helped educators face assessment issues, and provided a framework for professional statements encouraged by the Speech Communication Association. Three pages of references are included. (HOD)

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DEVELOPING COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE IN CHILDREN: TEN YEARS LATER

by

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ABSTRACT

DEVELOPING COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE IN CHILDREN: TEN YEARS LATER

In the early 70's, the Speech Communication Association, with the support of a grant from the Axe-Houghton Foundation, sponsored a National Project on Speech Communication Competencies. The final report of that project, edited by R.R. Allen and Kenneth L. Brown, was published in 1976 by the National Textbook Company under the title Developing Communication Competence in Children. In this paper, the project co-editors reflect upon the impact of the project on subsequent efforts in curriculum development, teacher education, and instructional assessment. Specifically, the authors conclude that the approach identified in the project report remains a viable model for program development and evaluation ten years later.

Ten years have passed since the publication of Developing Communication Competence in Children (Allen and Brown, 1976). That book, the final report of the Speech Communication Association's National Project on Speech Communication Competencies, marked the completion of three years of research and development activities by members of the project staff with the support of a grant from the Axe-Houghton Foundation.

The purpose of the National Project was to identify directions for speech communication instruction in the schools. This purpose was realized through two phases of research and development. An input phase included a review of literature on children's cognitive, social, and communication development, a study of children's competencies in various communication settings, and an assessment of teachers' attitudes toward the goals of speech communication instruction. A synthesis phase arrived at a perspective for guiding the development of instructional programs. This perspective came to be known as the functional communication approach to instruction.

Two key themes characterize this approach: (1) Instruction for competence in speech communication is organized around five categories of communication acts: controlling, expressing feeling, informing, ritualizing, and imagining. This classification is based on research conducted by Wells (1973). (2) In accordance with research on the growth of competence (Connolly and Bruner, 1974), instructional situations should be designed to help students (a) develop a wide repertoire of communication strategies and skills, (b) select skills which seem appropriate to the situations, (c) implement the skills through practice, and (d) evaluate the effectiveness and appropriateness of the skills employed.

In the years following the publication of the report, a number of sources serving a variety of purposes have drawn on the project. Rubin and Mead (1984) observed that the publication of the Project Report "has helped guide many subsequent efforts in curriculum, instruction, and evaluation" (p. 3). This article represents the first attempt to identify and classify the kinds of "subsequent efforts" that reflect notice of or influence by the Project Report. Apparently the project has influenced curriculum development, instructional materials, scholarly dialogue about communication competence, instructional assessment and professional statements.

Curriculum Development

Since the primary purpose of the National Project was "to identify the most fruitful directions for the development of speech communication in the schools" (Allen and Brown, 1976, p. v), one important measure of project impact is the extent to which curriculum development has been encouraged. In order that curriculum development not be left to chance, the project concluded with the preparation of two sample mini-curricula which were published in the form of ERIC TRIP booklets (Wood, 1977).

In 1981, state curriculum documents began to emerge that were influenced, in part, by the National Project. In Illinois, for example, a special task force on oral communication skills produced a curriculum for parents entitled Parents as Teachers: Helping Your Children to Become Better Communicators (1981). This curriculum provides sample learning activities for parents to use with children at different age levels--preschool through senior high school. For each level, sample activities are provided for each of the five functions

identified by the National Project: informing, expressing feelings, controlling, imagining, and ritualizing.

A second Illinois curriculum document, Basic Oral Communication Skills: A Program Sequence for Illinois (1981, 1983), draws upon the National Project's dimensions of competence (repertoire of experiences, selecting strategies, implementing strategies, and evaluating performances) for the primary system of organizing the program sequence, K-12. This curriculum also includes some learning activities included in the TRIP booklets by Wood (1977).

At the same time, in Wisconsin, a "Matrix for Generating Curricula in Communication" (Allen, 1977) was used to inspire the creation of The Wisconsin Alternative Curriculum Design in Basic English/Communication Skills (1981). The matrix consisted of twenty-five cells formed by the intersection of the five functions, mentioned earlier, and five communication contexts (intrapersonal communication, dyadic communication, small group communication, public communication, and mass communication). Ninth and tenth grade curricula were formed by filling each cell of the matrix with a reading, writing, speaking, and listening activity organized around an appropriate theme.

Also in 1981, a set of curriculum guides was published by the Independence (Missouri) school district. The guides, entitled Listen While I Speak: A Resource for Communication Skills (1981), consisted of three volumes: Volume 1, Primary K-3; Volume 2, Intermediate 4-6; and Volume 3, Junior High 7-8. The five functions and the four dimensions identified in the National Project were used as a means of structuring all of the activities included in the guides.

A third Illinois curriculum document, Basic Listening Skills (1982), is indebted to the National Project for the functions of communication and to the

Wisconsin Alternative Design for the matrix format. A number of specific listening skills are identified for each of the five functions of communication. At the conclusion of each skills list, a sample learning activity for that function is included. Taken collectively the sample learning activities represent several contexts and grade levels.

In the state of Washington, an Oral and Written Communications Task Force prepared a curriculum document entitled Developing Oral Communication Skills (1982). Attention is given to the four dimensions of competence and the five functions of communication in an introductory essay by Judy Nyquist and Barbara Clinton. The subsequent list of basic oral communication skills is organized under the five functions of communication identified by the National Project. The particular skills identified are an expanded and modified version of the original competencies identified by Wood (1977a and b).

Three years after the publication of the preceding guide, the state of Washington released a more comprehensive document, English/Language Arts K-12 Curriculum Guidelines (1985). While the earlier guide used the functions as a means of organizing a list of oral communication skills, this guide uses the functions as a means of organizing instruction across the listening, reading, speaking, and writing language modes. It is important to note that, although the National Project was primarily concerned with improving the quality of oral communication instruction, the conception of communication competence espoused has been found useful, in this document, as a means of organizing written communication instruction as well.

The final curriculum document located by the authors was prepared by the Language Arts Task Force of the state of Wisconsin. This publication, entitled

A Guide to Curriculum Planning in English Language Arts (1986), draws on the functions of communication, somewhat modified by subsequent efforts, in an attempt to encourage a functional, communication-based approach to the teaching of the English/Language Arts. Here again, the functional approach identified by the National Project has been found to be a viable means for organizing instruction in reading and writing as well as in speaking and listening.

Before leaving the area of curriculum development, it should be noted that in Wisconsin the functions of communication have been used as a means of updating the forensic events offered in the cocurriculum across the state. The former slate of forensic events in that state was analyzed according to the functions being served by the events. This analysis disclosed that some functions were receiving insufficient attention in forensic events sponsored by the Wisconsin High School Forensic Association. Consequently, beginning with the 1984-85 school year, four new events were added and three additional events were modified to provide a more balanced coverage of the major functions of communication. The four new events, reported in the 1984-86 Speech Teachers Manual, are farrago (expressing feeling), group discussion (ritualizing), group interpretative reading (imagining), and special occasion speeches (ritualizing).

Instructional Materials

The National Project Report has been cited in instructional materials with varying topics and audiences. In this section the impact of the project on four types of instructional resources will be considered.

Books on Communication Development. In the same year the National Project Report was published, another book, Children and Communication: Verbal and Nonverbal Language Development (Wood, 1976), contained a communication guide in

the appendix. The guide describes an interview format called "People I Talk To," which the author used with young children as a member of the field study committee of the National Project. The format constitutes a system for eliciting information from children about their communication experiences.

Two years later, the second edition of Children's Speech: A Practical Introduction to Communication Development (Hopper and Naremore, 1978), drew upon the five functions of communication. The authors, former members of the National Project's Literature Survey Committee, used the functions in a chapter devoted to communication pragmatics.

In a second edition of her book, Wood (1981) uses the perspective advanced by the National Project Report in both Chapters 12 and 13. In Chapter 12, "The Communication Framework," the five functions of communication identified by Wells (1973) and adapted by the National Project receive extensive attention. In Chapter 13, "Communication Competencies," the dimensions of communication competence developed by Connolly and Bruner (1974) and affirmed by the National Project provide a framework for organizing the chapter. Actually, these two chapters do a very nice job of elaborating on the perspective advanced by the National Project. They represent one of the more faithful representations of the project perspective available.

Books on Classroom Communication. Three books on the subject of classroom communication have referred to National Project findings. In their chapter on the verbal symbol system, Bassett and Smythe (1979) draw liberally on the five functions to support and clarify the concept of pragmatics or language use. They also emphasize that utterances can serve more than one function simultaneously, that the purpose of a system of functions is to represent a

descriptive rule about communication, and that the five functions pertain to listeners as well as speakers.

In her chapter on teacher influence in the classroom, Cooper (1981 and 1984) cites the Project's descriptions of the competent child and the competent adolescent, as they are detailed in the TRIP booklets (Wood, 1977), under her discussion of the teacher as counselor. Later in the same chapter she draws upon the Project when describing the teacher as a competent communicator; both the dimensions and the functions are included in this discussion.

Seiler, Schulte, and Lieb-Brilhart (1984) refer to the National Project Report when addressing the development of functional communication competence in children. Both the functions and the dimensions of communication are included.

Books on Teaching Methods and Strategies. Two books dealing with teaching methods were influenced by the National Project Report. The first, Speaking and Writing K-12, edited by Thaiss and Suhor (1984), includes references to the National Project Report in three of the nine chapters included in the text. In all three instances, the functions of communication are viewed as important to school curriculum development.

The second text, Learning Language Through Communication: A Functional Perspective (Allen, Brown, and Yatvin, 1986), uses the functions of communication as the major organizational principle for the book. Part 2, "The Functions of Language in Communication," contains chapters entitled "Informative Communication," "Affective Communication," "Imaginative Communication," "Ritualistic Communication," and "Persuasive Communication." By focusing on the functions of language, the authors have accomplished an authentic integration of the reading, writing, listening, and speaking modes of language.

Books on Speech Communication for the Secondary School. Two high school speech communication textbooks have used the National Project perspective to some degree. Person To Person: An Introduction to Speech Communication, Galvin and Book (1984), identifies exchanging information, exerting control, following social rules, and sharing feelings as the specific purposes of communication. Although introduced in Chapter 1, these functions appear not to be clearly reflected in subsequent chapters.

A second high school textbook, Listening By Doing: Developing Effective Listening Skills, Galvin (1985), identifies five major purposes for listening: to engage in social rituals, to exchange information, to exert control, to share feelings, and to enjoy oneself. These purposes for listening strongly influence the structure and content of the remainder of the book. Although no source is given for these purposes for listening, it seems safe to assume that they were inspired by the Project Report or other documents which were themselves inspired by the Project Report.

Dialogue about the Nature of Competence

The functional communication approach advocated in the Project Report has contributed to the ongoing dialogue about the nature of communication competence. In the November 1978 issue of Communication Education, members of the project staff and others re-articulated the functional approach in addressing the theme of that issue, "Redefining Literacy: Speaking and Listening as Basics." Allen and Wood (1978) address the importance of speaking and listening instruction in the schools and then set forth the five functions and four dimensions of communication as a framework for providing such instruction.

In the same issue, Hopper and Wrather (1978) answer questions that elementary school teachers are likely to raise about the functional communication approach. They offer guidelines for implementing this approach in the classroom and provide assurances that this approach can be used successfully by all teachers. Similarly, Book (1978) encourages secondary school teachers "to integrate the teaching of functional communication competencies into their classes" (p. 322).

In the Review of Educational Research, Wiemann and Backlund (1980), provide a discussion of "Current Theory and Research in Communication Competence." In the process of reviewing a number of theories of communicative competence, they cite the National Project's definition of competence, mention how the Project underscores the significance of function in the educational process, and cite the five functions.

In December 1981, a special edition of the Journal of the Communication Association of the Pacific was devoted to the theme "Teaching Communication Competencies to Second Language Learners." In the introduction to the issue, Allen and Knop (1981) describe the communicative approach to second language learning, identify the perceived advantages of such an approach, introduce the five functions around which communication experiences can be organized, and provide guidelines for using the approach. In subsequent parts of the journal, each of the five functions of communication is represented by two articles; the first article in each pair elaborates the function while the second offers methods for successfully teaching that function.

Not all of the dialogue encouraged by the National Project has been positive in its appraisal of Project findings. McCroskey (1982), for example,

takes the Project to task for tying communication competence to actual performance of the language in social situations. He is concerned that this definition is "narrowly behavioral in tone" (p. 2). In fact, the full definition of competence chosen by the National Project staff is considerably richer than the single sentence McCrosky chose to abstract (see Allen and Brown, 1976, pp. 248-250). Nonetheless, the continuing dialogue about the nature of communication competence is welcomed.

The dialogue on competence was continued by Brown (1982) and Lieb-Brilhart (1982) during and following their participation in a national invitational conference on basic skills. In her discussion of the range of communication insights and skills which deserve consideration in the schools, Lieb-Brilhart makes reference to the National Project Report. In focusing on methods of teaching and assessing those skills, Brown gives substantial attention to the functional communication approach to oral communication instruction, an approach that contrasts with four other approaches: component skills, communication activities, participant networks, and referential games.

Instructional Assessment

The National Project has also had some impact on the assessment of oral communication. In the mid-seventies the functions were adopted as a means of generating test items for the National Assessment of Educational Progress Speaking and Listening Assessment Feasibility Study. Subsequently, it was decided that items would not be generated for the imaginative function (Mead, 1977), but items were constructed for the remaining four functions.

Larson, Backlund, Redmond, and Barbour (1978) cite the National Project's definition of competence, dimensions of competence, and processes that appear to

be associated with communication competence (pp. 15-22). In the next chapter (pp. 34-36) a list of developmental goals and their educational implications are abstracted from the Project Report.

Wiig (1982) draws on the National Project for four of the five functions of communication. She then develops materials to be used in developing communication skills among adolescents with special needs, such as those who have learning disabilities, have language disorders, or have been raised in a non-English language background. The functions that are represented in the Let's Talk materials are ritualizing, informing, controlling, and expressing feeling. The materials include a checklist to help identify the client's current needs and skills in the five functions, activities to help them acquire and maintain fluency in basic and more complex speech acts, and games to enhance flexibility in selecting and formulating speech appropriate to one's intention and context.

Professional Statements

The Speech Communication Association has formed a variety of committees and task forces to consider and make statements about various issues of importance to the profession. It is apparent from the statements produced by some of these groups that they were influenced in varying degrees by the National Project Report. In 1978 a brochure was prepared by representatives of the Speech Communication Association and the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association. The brochure (Standards, n.d.) provides standards for effective oral communication programs. The standards include basic assumptions about oral communicaiton and a list of communication purposes that were taken from the Project Report.

In 1980, the Speech Communication Association established a task force to identify essential speaking and listening skills for elementary school students. The guidelines (Backlund, 1985) clearly reflect the communication functions identified by the Project Report. More recently, members of a subcommittee of the SCA Committee on Assessment of Teaching approved a set of teacher speaking and listening behaviors that reflect the five functions of communication included in the National Project Report (Allen, 1985). Even more recently two brochures have been prepared under SCA leadership for use by parents in helping their children to develop speaking and listening skills (Cooper, Feezel, and Galvin, 1986).

Conclusion

It would appear that the statement by Rubin and Mead (1984), noted in the introduction to this article, is an accurate assessment. The National Project Report has encouraged curriculum development, has influenced the preparation of instructional materials, has contributed to the dialogue about the nature of communication competence, has helped educators face assessment issues, and has provided a framework for professional statements encouraged by the Speech Communication Association.

When the authors began to trace project influences, they did not expect to find the array of materials that was discovered. Now, having discovered a wide assortment of materials that reflect the National Project Report, the authors are certain that they have missed others and will appreciate notification of their oversights.

One final observation seems in order. The functional communication approach has implications far beyond those envisioned by members of the project

staff meeting in Madison, Wisconsin, for the synthesis stage of the project in May of 1975. This approach may be used to generate curricula and refine methods of teaching reading and writing as well as speaking and listening. The functional communication approach can be used with children who have special needs as well as with average children. It is also a useful strategy when addressing issues of second language learning.

Many members of the project staff left Madison on a Friday in late May 1975 with feelings of uncertainty regarding the useability of the conceptualization hammered out in those final, fleeting moments of project deliberation. Were it possible to return to those moments with the wisdom of hindsight, we suspect that members of the synthesis phase would confirm rather than change many of the points of consensus reached.

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